

## **Education and social cohesion in Latin America**

**Simon Schwartzman**

Paper prepared for the Conference on “Social Cohesion in Latin America”,  
Kellogg Institute, University of Notre Dame Abril 16 y 17, 2009  
(preliminary version)

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### **Expansion of education**

Education has expanded very significantly in Latin America in the last decades. For the countries in the Social Cohesion project, except Guatemala, the number of people with less than primary education is under 4%, and 75% has some level of secondary education or more. The social cohesion project did not include rural areas, where education levels tend to be lower, and, because of that, these percentages overstate the countries'

education figures. Still, there is a growing trend for the population to move to urban centers<sup>1</sup>.

**Table 1: education levels of respondents (%)**

	Total	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Guatemala	México	Peru
Less than primary	4	1	3	1	2	16	4	2
Primary	22	9	22	10	26	40	31	17
Secondary I	20	34	24	11	19	14	27	7
Secondary II	32	27	37	49	32	19	21	38
Higher education	23	29	14	30	22	12	17	37
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

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<sup>1</sup> For education levels, we adopted the UNESCO classification (<http://www.unesco.org.uy/educacion/estadisticas.html>). “Primary” corresponds to the 4-5 first years of education, with one teacher per class. “Secondary I” corresponds to the subsequent four years, when classes are divided among teachers for different subjects (in Brazil, this would correspond to the years 5 to 9 of fundamental education). Secondary II corresponds to upper secondary or “middle” education, the three to 4 years that precede higher education. Higher education includes all kinds of post-secondary education.

In all countries except Argentina, men are better educated than women. This difference is more marked in countries with large indigenous populations. In Guatemala, 63.5% of the women only have primary education or less, compared with 47.1% for men. In Mexico, 39.8% compared with 19.5%; in Peru, 21.2% compared with 15%. In all others, differences are small or non-existent. Beyond that, we find that, in all countries, the education levels of the younger persons is higher than of the older ones, the subjects' education is much higher than that of their parents, and their children's much higher than that of their own. There is a clear trend and high expectations for education mobility everywhere.

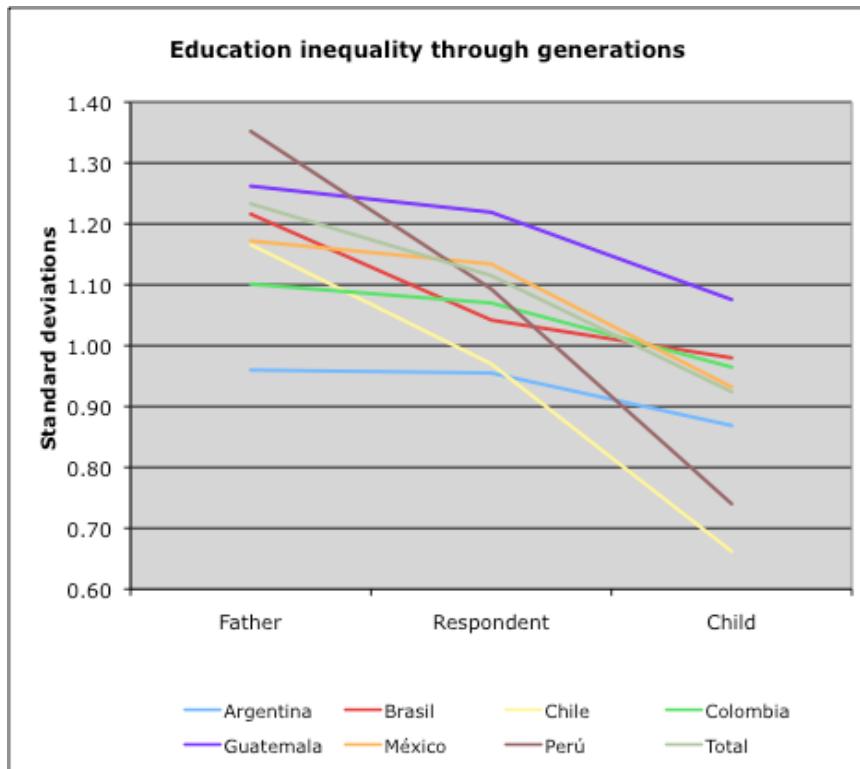
**Table 2 – Educational levels of respondents, their parents and children, by age group (%)**

	Total	18 to 29	30 to 45	46 and more	Father	Mother	Respondent	Son or daughter with highest education level
Less than primary	4	1	1	5	11	14	3	1
Primary	22	7	14	32	35	37	18	2
Secondary I	20	17	23	22	20	21	21	14
Secondary II	32	44	35	24	20	20	34	37
Higher	23	31	27	17	13	8	25	43
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

### **Equity, stratification and social mobility.**

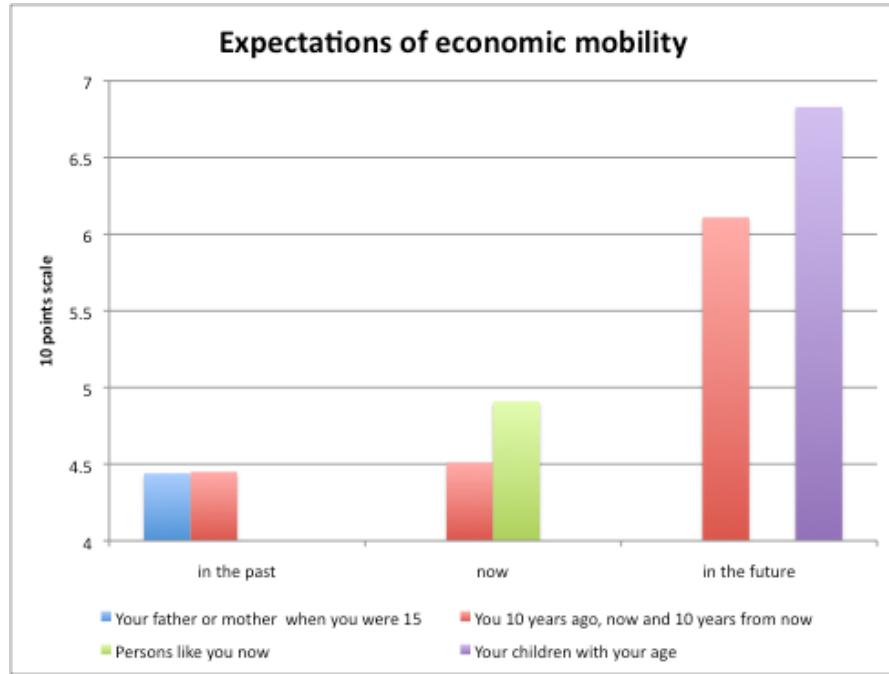
When there is little or no education, equity in education is high – everybody is more or less in the same poor situation. As education improves, giving more access to some groups than others, inequality increases; as the education systems mature and become universal, inequity goes down again. The data from EcoSocial suggest that education inequality is going down in the region, with more inequality among the parents than among the respondents, and less among their children. To observe this, we can look at the standard deviations of education levels in each generation, in a 5-point educational scale.

**Chart 1 – Education inequality through generations, by country**



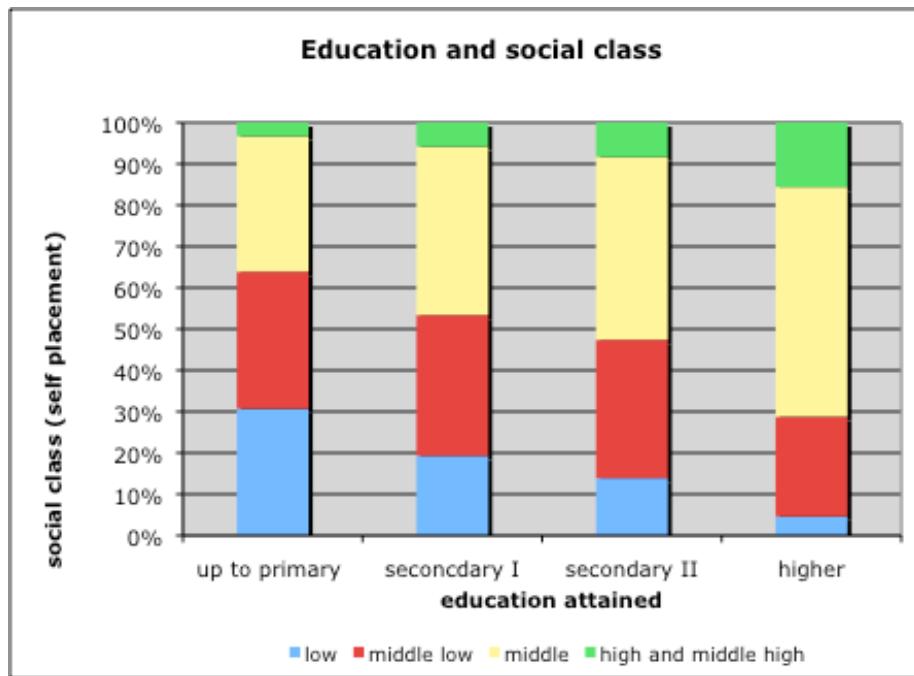
The experiences of educational mobility and the expectation of still more mobility for the next generation are associated with strong positive expectations for the future. In all countries except Guatemala and Mexico, the respondents say that their economic conditions today are similar to that of 10 years ago, and those in Argentina believe it is worse now; but most of them believe their economic condition will be better 10 years from now, a better still for their children.

**Chart 2 – Expectations of economic mobility**



Education is related to social class, but most respondents in the survey place themselves in the middle or lower middle class, with 8.5% in the high and middle-high class, and 16.4 in the lower class; and the “gama” correlation coefficient between education levels and social class is .357 for the whole sample, with the highest in Chile (.520) and the lowest in Brazil (.399). Clearly, the links between education and class position are not rigid, allowing for social mobility and improvement.

**Chart 3 - Education and social class**

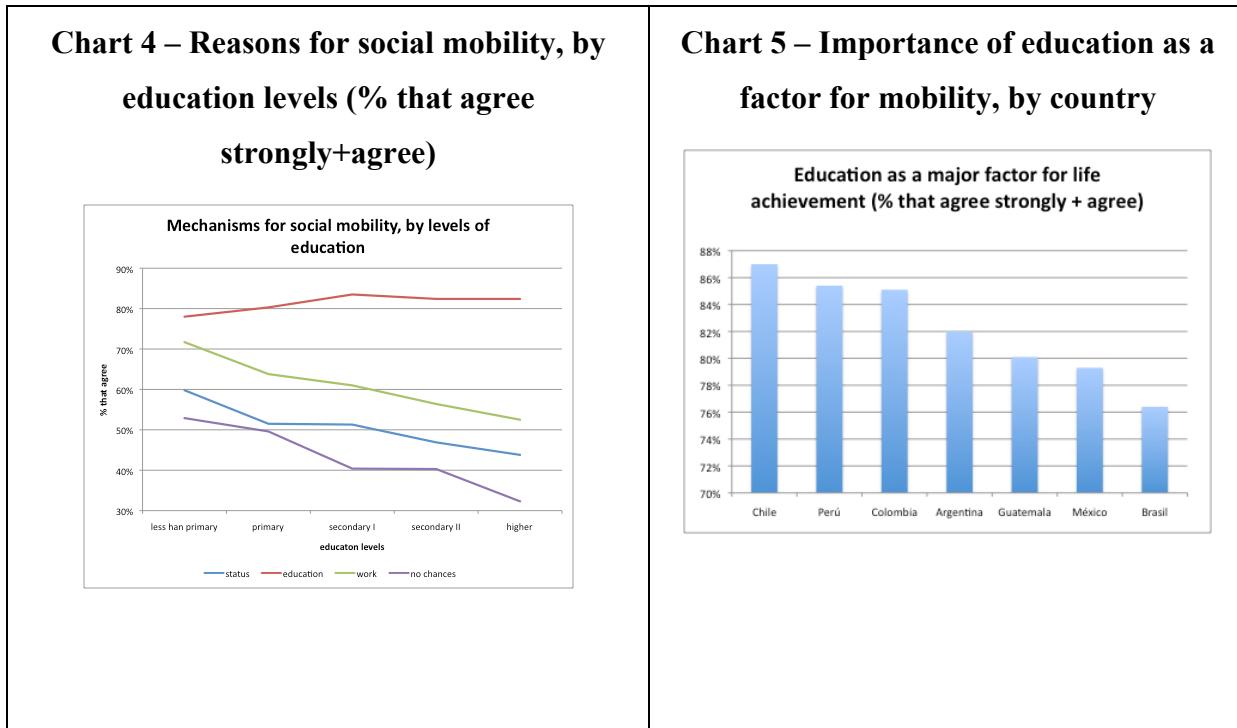


Education is related to the way people perceive the mechanisms for social mobility. In the survey, respondents were asked to state their agreement or disagreement with different such mechanisms:

- Wealth and status: what one can achieve in this country depends mostly on the wealth and the names of the family in which one was born.
- Education: what one can achieve in life depends on the education level he was able to achieve.
- Work: in this country there are opportunities for progress for anyone who works hard enough.
- No chances: there are no real opportunities for people like me; the only way is to look for opportunities abroad.

As the chart below shows, at all education levels, about 80% of the respondents believe that education is the main mechanism for social mobility. As the respondent's education levels increase, the relative importance of sheer hard work and family wealth go down,

together with the belief that there are no chances for mobility for persons like one. This confirms the very high hopes and expectations placed in education. There are significant differences by country – Chileans and Peruvians believe more in education than Brazilians and Mexicans – but the figures are high for all the countries.



Another set of questions looked at whether people tend to explain social inequalities in terms of factors that depend or not on the individuals themselves – hard work, for instance, instead of acquired wealth or poverty. For most respondents, individual characteristics are more important – the absence or presence of initiative, hard work, talent, vices, personal talent. Inherited characteristics and social status characteristics – family wealth, personal contacts, and discrimination – are seeing as playing much lesser roles. The relationships between these views and education is almost non-existent, except for the fact that more educated persons give more weight to social contacts and less

weight to initiative and work in the creation of wealth than less educated ones. This can be interpreted as meaning that more educated persons see themselves as beneficiaries of social status, rather than achievers, confirming to some extent the credentialist interpretation of the role of education in Latin American societies.

National differences are also important. Argentineans, in spite of being more educated, are the most fatalistic in the sample about 40% to believe that one's faith is established at birth, while Guatemalans, Chileans, Mexicans and Peruvians tend to look for individual explanations (hard work or laziness)

**Table 3 – Reasons for poverty and wealth, by education**

<b>Reasons for poverty and wealth</b>						
	Education levels					
	Less than primary	Primary	Secondary I	Secondary II	Higher	Total
<b>Reasons for poverty</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Parent's poverty	25%	21%	22%	19%	25%	22%
Laziness and lack of initiative	37%	37%	38%	43%	41%	40%
Vices and alcoholism	24%	26%	20%	22%	18%	22%
Social discrimination	15%	15%	19%	16%	16%	17%
<b>Reasons for wealth</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Inheritance	27%	27%	28%	27%	29%	28%
Initiative and hard work	44%	45%	40%	38%	32%	39%
Social contacts	10%	8%	10%	12%	19%	12%
Personal talent and abilities	20%	21%	22%	23%	21%	22%

**Table 4 - Reasons for poverty and wealth, by country**

<b>Reasons for poverty and wealth</b>									
<b>Reasons for poverty</b>	Education levels								
	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Guatemala	México	Peru	Total	100%
Parent's poverty	37%	26%	21%	18%	20%	15%	15%	22%	100%
Laziness and lack of initiative	32%	35%	42%	38%	36%	50%	48%	40%	100%
Vices and alcoholism	17%	18%	22%	23%	29%	23%	22%	22%	100%
Social discrimination	15%	21%	15%	21%	15%	13%	14%	17%	100%
<b>Reasons for wealth</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Inheritance	41%	37%	30%	27%	22%	21%	13%	28%	100%
Initiative and hard work	27%	35%	33%	33%	51%	47%	46%	39%	100%
Social contacts	15%	9%	15%	14%	9%	13%	12%	12%	100%
Personal talent and abilities	18%	19%	23%	27%	17%	19%	30%	22%	100%

Another set of questions asked about the chances for social mobility for different types of persons and goals, according to a 5-point scale going from very high (1) to very low chances (5). More educated persons believe that education is accessible for intelligent persons regardless of other factors, are more optimistic about women's opportunities in the labor market, but are more pessimistic, in general, about the chances of poor people to come out of poverty through hard work.

**Table 5 – Chances in life, by levels of education**

Chances in life, by education levels (% that give very high and high chances)						
	Education levels					
	Less than primary	Primary	Secondary I	Secondary II	Higher Ed	Total
For a simple young person to complete secondary education	39%	42%	46%	46%	49%	46%
For a poor person to come out of poverty	24%	23%	21%	19%	18%	20%
For anyone to open an independent business	36%	37%	38%	39%	37%	38%
For an intelligent but poor young person to enter a university	30%	31%	33%	35%	41%	35%
For a woman to get a good work position	44%	45%	50%	51%	57%	51%

Although the evidence is not very strong, it is possible to suggest a coherent interpretation for these data. Education attainment in Latin America results from a combination of opportunities provided by the persons' family conditions and from an expanding economy. Educated persons like to believe that access to education do not depend on pre-established social conditions, but on personal competencies. Their view of poor and uneducated people, however, is rather pessimistic: they are seen as lazy, lacking of initiative, and, because of that, their chances to move ahead are not very high. In this way, the more educated can both justify their achievements and the persistence of poverty and social inequality. Uneducated people, on the other hand, believe more in their ability to overcome poverty through hard work. To the extent that this interpretation is correct, it confirms once again the ambiguous nature of education, as both a mechanism of social mobility and a factor that strengthens social differentiation and social inequality.

## **Education and social cohesion**

Education is clearly an important component of social cohesion. There is broad evidence that more educated persons are more likely to generate more social capital, to establish networks and to have more trust in other people; to be more tolerant and have less prejudice against persons from other nationalities, cultures, social status and religion; and to have better appreciation for democratic institutions and respect for human rights (Gradstein and Justman 2002; Green and Preston 2001; Heyneman 2000; Lipset 1960)<sup>2</sup>. However, these correlations depend also on specific historical conditions, and cannot be taken for granted. As we learned from German history, high levels of education can also be associated with high levels of intolerance, prejudice and authoritarianism.

There are three main ways by which education can contribute to social cohesion. The first is through the transmission of values and the sense of belonging to a given social community. In Latin America as well as in Europe, the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations were the first institutions to get involved with education, for

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<sup>2</sup> This summary of the links between education, social and human capital is based largely on the excellent presentation by Green and Preston, 2001.

reading the sacred texts and the transmission of their core knowledge, traditions and values, and this is also part of the Jewish and Muslim traditions. With the creation of the National states in Europe and Latin America, the governments took the responsibility for public education, sometimes in cooperation and sometimes in conflict with the churches (Vincent 2000). Émile Durkheim, writing in France at the end of the 19th century, stressed the importance of public education as the cement that would give unity and coherence to the modern nation state, in a time when the division of labor was destroying the more traditional forms of social identity and community life (Durkheim 1893; Durkheim 1922). In Chile and Argentina, already in the 19th century, Sarmiento and Andrés Bello thought the same way, and placed public education as a central component for the construction of the region's new nation states (Weinberg 1999). Other countries, including Brazil XX (Azevedo et al. 1932), started much later to build their public education systems, with different degrees of quality and coverage.

The second way by which education can contribute to social cohesion is through the development of human capital, improving the person's competencies and their standards of life. The notion that education creates wealth, spelled out in the pioneer works by Schultz and Becker (Becker 1964; Schultz 1970), became a major argument to convince economists and governments of the need to invest more in education.

The bridge between these two visions is the theory of social capital, of which an early formulation can be found in the writings of De Tocqueville about the voluntary associations and their role as intermediate structures linking atomized individuals and the political institutions in modern democracies (Tocqueville 1981), as well as on Karl Polanyi's concern with the breakdown of social ties provoked by the markets (Polanyi 2001). These original formulations led to a large number of studies on the role of social and trust networks in the creation of wealth (Coleman 1988; Fukuyama 1995) and, more broadly, on the links between social capital and democracy (Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti 1993; Putnam 2001; Skocpol 2000; Skocpol 2003).

Finally, there are those that look at education with more skepticism. For them, education, and more specially formal education, creates professional and social monopolies and discrimination, limits social mobility and stimulates an ever growing competition for

education credentials, at a growing cost for society, and without necessarily creating more wealth (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Collins 1979; Collins 2000; Wolf 2002).

These opposite theories do not necessarily exclude each other. When the economy is expanding and becoming more diversified, education is a powerful mechanism to create new possibilities for work and wealth. Immigrants in many countries invest strongly in the education of their children as a way to overcome existing economic and status barriers, and increase their standards of life. However, in stagnant societies, the emphasis on educational status can work as a mechanism for social discrimination, and in such situations education credentials can become more important than their actual content, in terms of intellectual and professional competencies and skills. When educational stratification coincides with other forms of social education stratification combines with other forms of social stratification and cleavages – ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic, regional – the potential for social conflict becomes stronger. In such situations, education can, at the same time, contribute to strengthen the local and communitarian links, and isolate the local communities from the broader society – the distinction between “bonding” and “bridging” social capital suggested by Putnam. The experiences of trying to apply the so-called “Paulo Freire method” for education of disadvantaged persons, so popular in some pedagogical circles in Latin America, and more recently the creation of special schools for militants of the “worker’s landless movement” in Brazil, should be analyzed from this perspective (Caldart 2003; O’Cadiz, Wong and Torres 1998; Semeraro 2007; Souza 2007).

The EcoSocial survey shows that social cohesion in Latin America is very low, although it does increase with education, in the expected direction. Most of the people believe they cannot trust other persons, and almost half believe that nobody cares about what they think. Country differences are also important, and Guatemala and Peru show the lowest levels of social cohesion on these indicators.

**Table 6 – Social cohesion by education levels (% agreeing with the statements)**

	Education						
	Less than primary	Primary	Secondary I	Secondary II	Higher Education	Total	
You cannot trust and have to be careful with most people	90%	90%	89%	89%	80%	88%	
Most people wants to make use of the others	85%	80%	74%	74%	61%	73%	
Usually, nobody cares about what I think	54%	49%	45%	40%	28%	41%	
I am always left out of things happening around me	42%	36%	29%	23%	13%	26%	
I feel that people around me would do very little if anything happened with me	42%	36%	26%	23%	16%	26%	

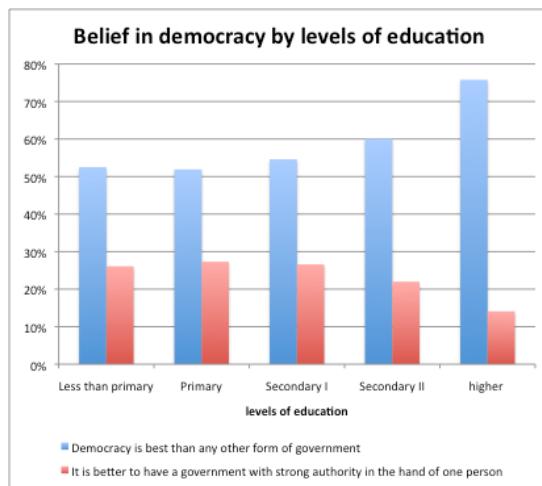
**Table 7 - Social cohesion by country (% agreeing with the statements)**

	Country								
	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Guatemala	México	Peru	Total	
You cannot trust and have to be careful with most people	77%	96%	90%	87%	87%	81%	94%	88%	
Most people wants to make use of the others	55%	90%	66%	69%	77%	71%	79%	73%	
Usually, nobody cares about what I think	32%	34%	41%	48%	51%	36%	47%	41%	
I am always left out of things happening around me	15%	20%	20%	33%	38%	28%	28%	26%	
I feel that people around me would do very little if anything happened with me	12%	18%	19%	28%	42%	26%	37%	26%	

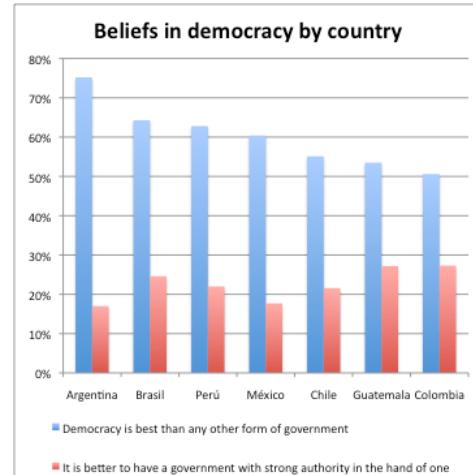
## Education, democratic values and perceptions of society

Lipset's hypothesis was that better educated people have more appreciation for democracy, for two reasons. First, they are more equipped to understand the abstract nature of a democratic order, as something different from supporting or being against a given political leader or his party; second, because they are more likely to benefit from the benefits of an open and competitive society. The survey confirms that this relationship exists in Latin America, but is not very strong, and there are important differences among countries.

**Chart 6 - Belief in democracy by levels of education**



**Chart 7 - Belief in democracy by country**



But what does it mean, in practice, to agree that democracy is the best type of government? A central component of a democratic society should be the respect to the person's legal rights. However, in the survey, 42% believe that criminals should not have the same rights as honest people, with the highest percentage – close to 50% - in Brazil and Chile. This opinion, differently from the previous one on the belief in democracy, is

not related to education, and the correlation between support for democracy and support for human rights is close to zero.

There are other questions in the survey about the justification of violence as a mechanism to assure human rights and made changes in society. Depending on the issues, between 62 and 70% of the respondents say that violence is never justified, while others believe that is justified always or in some occasions. about 70%, believe that violence is never justified. The less educated are more prone to justify political violence than the more educated, but the differences among countries are much larger, with respondents in Guatemala and Mexico being much more favorable to political violence than those in other countries. It is also noteworthy that there is less justification for violence regarding social, class and political issues than regarding environment protection, which suggests that the acceptance of political violence is not related to social or ethnic cleavages, but happens across all social segments.

**Table 8 - Situations in which violence is always justified, by education**

	Situations in which violence is always justified						
	Education levels	less than primary	Primar y	Secondar y I	Second ary II	Higher Ed	Total
When indigenous people claim ancestral land		22%	17%	14%	12%	10%	13%
To introduce revolutionary changes		15%	10%	8%	7%	8%	8%
To defend the environment		23%	19%	17%	15%	14%	17%
When the poor claim for better living conditions		22%	20%	17%	15%	12%	16%
When people oppose a dictatorship		17%	14%	15%	15%	18%	15%

**Table 9 - Situations in which violence is always justified, by country**

	Situations in which violence is always justified, by country							
	Country							
	Argentina	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Guatemala	México	Peru	Total
When indigenous people claim ancestral land	10%	8%	10%	13%	20%	22%	11%	13%
To introduce revolutionary changes	6%	5%	4%	5%	15%	16%	8%	8%
To defend the environment	11%	11%	11%	14%	26%	27%	17%	17%
When the poor claim for better living conditions	10%	8%	13%	16%	22%	27%	16%	16%
When people oppose a dictatorship	15%	7%	17%	12%	20%	23%	16%	15%

## Conclusions

The data confirm that in all countries, education has been as an important factor for social mobility between generations, and there is a strong expectation that it will continue to play this role. This expectation for educational mobility is accompanied by a general expectation that economic conditions in the future will be much better than today, even in places where the experiences of the last ten years was not very good.

However, the expectations for educational mobility for oneself is associated with a rather pessimistic view about what other people can achieve. Only 45% of the respondents believe that a simple person (“un joven comun y corriente”) has chances to complete secondary education, and only 35% believe that a poor but intelligent youngster (“un joven inteligente pero sin recursos”) has a good chance to attend a university. Persons with higher education tend to believe that their achievements are related to their personal qualities, but also that opportunities in their country depend on family connections and wealth.

Indeed, access to education is related to the socioeconomic conditions of the families, to more access to durable goods and services, and to perceptions of belongingness to upper social strata. However, these correlations do not allow us to say that society in Latin American countries are sharply divided along education strata, and there are no signs of social cleavages which care directly related to education attainment.

The data confirm, to some extent, the hypothesis that there is a link between higher levels of education and the appreciation for democracy, but the relation is weak, and variations among countries are more important than variations among educational strata. Besides, we do not know exactly what the respondents understand by democracy, and the fact that, for many, there is no link between democracy and the legal rights or rejection of violence as a political mean, suggest that the meaning of democracy is probably very shallow.

Finally, we cannot be sure that the region’s education institutions are playing the role of transmitting and strengthening the values of trust, respect for human rights, respect of social diversity and others that are supposed to be the foundations of social cohesion and democracy. To know more about this, it would be necessary to go beyond the simple information about the educational levels achieved by the respondents, and learn much

about the ways these contents are actually taught in the schools and adopted by the students throughout their lives.

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